

Port of Los Angeles plan weighs on shippers

The Harbor Commission will require trucking companies to shoulder costs of the clean air program, a move rejected by Long Beach.

By Louis Sahagun
Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

The Los Angeles Harbor Commission on Thursday unanimously approved a clean air plan requiring shipping companies to buy and maintain a modernized fleet of big rigs and employ thousands of independent truckers who currently operate under contract.

A spokesman for the American Trucking Assn. derided the plan as a "scheme to unionize port drivers" and vowed that his group would sue the port. Spokesman Curtis Whalen said the plan violates court rulings allowing the trucking industry unrestricted access to markets nationwide.

Nonetheless, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa told about 300 truckers at Banning's Landing Community Center in Wilmington, "It's a great day. In a few months from now, your children will begin to breathe easier, and so will your grandchildren.

"Today, Los Angeles has said enough is enough," he added. "When 1,200 lives are cut short every year by a barrage of diseases, ranging from emphysema to cancer of the mouth, we have a moral obligation to act fast."

The mayor's comments capped an emotional commission hearing marked by sharp comments directed by Los Angeles City Councilwoman Janice Hahn at Port of Long Beach Harbor Commission President Mario Cordero, who was a guest.

Pointing a finger of blame at Cordero, whose commission recently rejected the employee provision on grounds that it would invite a lawsuit that could delay the clean truck program, Hahn said, "Shame on those who say 'no' to the relationship between labor and clean air."

"I want you to go back to your side of the bridge and urge your commissioners to do the right thing," said Hahn, whose district includes the L.A. port. "You have broken faith with us."

Hundreds of truckers in the audience responded with loud applause, a standing ovation and an ebullient chant: "Janice! Janice!"

In an interview later, Cordero declined to comment, except to say, "The issues before us are political, and people who have a political agenda will be strong advocates."

The move by the Port of Los Angeles launches a landmark program to reform a broken freight hauling system and accelerate the replacement of a fleet of 16,800 trucks that spew harmful diesel emissions.

Both ports recently approved a progressive five-year ban on dirty trucks that starts Oct. 1. It aims to slash air pollution 80% in four years. But the ports parted ways over who should be responsible for ensuring that trucks meet air quality standards.

Los Angeles authorities believe the low-income drivers cannot afford the new \$100,000 trucks needed to achieve the desired environmental standards.

They also forecast a shortage of drivers because as many as 3,000 truckers are expected to fail pending federal background checks.

With the support of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, environmental groups and health advocates including the American Lung Assn., L.A. port commissioners unanimously adopted the employee model as the best strategy for achieving a stable work force and cleaner fleet.

"The existing system is a scam," Los Angeles Harbor Commission President David Freeman said in an interview. "It's a scheme by shipping companies to avoid responsibilities of an employer, and we're calling a halt to it."

But Whalen, the trucking association spokesman, called the plan illegal.

"We're going to go after Los Angeles with every thing we've got so their plan goes to hell in a handbasket," he said in an interview. "We will win and we will win handily."

Whalen said the association was working toward an agreement with the Port of Long Beach and that city's mayor, Bob Foster, whom he called "a reasonable guy, unlike that other one."

He was referring to Villaraigosa, who has long argued that port truckers deserve better wages and benefits.

"There may be lawsuits that will delay our effort, but we will not be deterred," Villaraigosa said in an interview. "We think we have a strong legal case, and we are moving ahead with the most ambitious plan to clean up a major port in the United States and perhaps the world."

louis.sahagun@latimes.com